



## Book review

### **Practical Intelligence in Everyday Life**

Robert J. Sternberg, George B. Forsythe, Jennifer Hedlund, Joseph A. Horvath, Richard K. Wagner, Wendy M. Williams, Scott A. Snook, and Elena L. Grigorenko (2000). New York: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 0 521 65056 9 (hbk), 0 521 65958 2 (pbk), pp. xiv+ 288. Hbk price US\$54.95, pbk price US\$21.95

*Practical Intelligence in Everyday Life* makes the same general claim as do the three previous books on the topic by Sternberg et al. (Sternberg, 1997; Sternberg & Horvath, 1999; Wagner & Sternberg, 1986).

[W]e argue that practical intelligence is a construct that is distinct from general intelligence and that ... [it] is at least as good a predictor of future success as is the academic form of intelligence [*g*] ... Arguably, practical intelligence is a better predictor ... (pp. xi–xii).

This is a rather bold claim. First, extensive analyses of the structure of human mental abilities have revealed no general mental ability that is independent of *g* (Carroll, 1993). Second, meta-analyses of many decades of research have shown that *g* is the best single predictor of performance in school, training, and jobs, especially in the higher levels of education and work. As has long been known, *g* also forecasts big differences in socio-economic success and social pathology (Gottfredson, in press). One would therefore expect *Practical Intelligence* to provide dramatic evidence to back up its claim, and this is just what the authors suggest: “[W]e have collected data testing our theories from many studies in many parts of the world with many different populations and have published most of these data (some are too recent to have been published) in refereed scientific journals (p. xii).”

*Practical Intelligence* summarizes the entire body of evidence on practical intelligence, but it is long on theorizing and short on data. The first three-quarters of the book is spent comparing the concept of practical intelligence — and tacit knowledge as its measurable component — to various other non-*g* approaches to intelligence (e.g., emotional intelligence, expert vs. novice performance, Sternberg’s various theories and subtheories of intelligence). It gives no hint, however, that the literature correlating *g* with life outcomes, especially job performance, is vast.

The book’s two penultimate chapters summarize the research relevant to the authors’ claim that practical intelligence rivals *g* in predicting performance in the real world. It consists of six criterion-related studies of tacit knowledge in five occupations: academic psychologists (two samples), business managers (four), bank managers (one), life insurance salespeople (one), and Army officers (three; Hedlund et al., 1998; Wagner, 1987; Wagner & Sternberg, 1985, 1990; Wagner, Suján, Suján, Rashotte, & Sternberg, 1999; Williams &

Sternberg, unpublished). Only the earliest two studies are reported in peer-reviewed articles. The 1990 and 1999 publications are book chapters that are themselves only sketchy summaries of unpublished work. The two remaining documents are, respectively, an unpublished 1998 technical report and a book that has been listed as “in press” since at least 1995 (variously with Erlbaum and Harcourt Brace, but for which the authors are now seeking a new publisher).

Chapter 8 summarizes results from the five studies of civilian occupations (involving eight samples with an average  $N$  of 55), all of which had already been summarized in similar for the seven samples for which an  $N$  was reported overviews years earlier (e.g., Sternberg, Wagner, Williams, & Horvath, 1995; see also Sternberg, Wagner, & Okagaki, 1993). Chapter 9 presents the only new data, which are<sup>1</sup> taken from the unpublished 1998 study of tacit knowledge for leadership at three levels in the Army’s chain of command ( $N$ ’s = 31, 163, and 368). The paucity of the data, new or old, is obscured by the book’s unsystematic, selective, and often overstated recounting of the evidence in the original publications.

When culled from the book’s narrative and juxtaposed study by study, the numbers tell a confused story, at best. Correlations of tacit knowledge with different measures of experience, compensation, and job performance (where available) are often inconsistent both within and across different samples — and they are weakest in the two largest. Only two of the six studies, one on civilian managers (Wagner & Sternberg, 1990) and one on Army officers (Hedlund et al., 1998), ever pit tacit knowledge against IQ in predicting job performance.

Even if the correlations between tacit knowledge and job performance were numerous and consistently high, they still would not be generalizable across everyday life, as the book implies. First, the five occupations represent only a highly selective corner of the occupational world and they say nothing about “everyday life” as such. Second, the various tacit knowledge tests measure only a small, nongeneralizable subset of essential worker skills: the untrained practical know-how that people pick up with experience in a particular setting. As the authors themselves argue, tacit knowledge is highly job specific and setting specific. Third, their measurement of both tacit knowledge and outcome criteria seems to have shifted over time. Whereas the first two supporting publications (five of the eight civilian samples) emphasized self-interested career building (regardless of performance), the more recent studies have emphasized actual job performance. The latter are relevant to the book’s claims regarding job performance, but the former (the only peer-reviewed studies) never clearly were. In short, the book’s lofty claims float virtually free of empirical grounding.

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<sup>1</sup> *Practical Intelligence* cites the wrong book title (*Advances in Lifespan Development*) and editors (H. Reese & J. Pluckett).

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